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Counselling Psychology training in the United Kingdom for Greek students who completed their undergraduate training in Greece: themes when comparing the two different organisational settings

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Abstract

Counselling Psychology training is a very important aspect of the profession of counselling psychologists. In Europe there are countries that do not include such training in their educational system with the result that a lot of Psychology graduates must move to a different country in order to qualify as counselling psychologists. A number of students who completed their first degree in Greece have studied, and still are studying, counselling psychology at a doctoral level in the United Kingdom. The present study interviewed students that have completed their first degree in Greece and are currently studying Counselling Psychology at a British higher education institute. A thematic analysis was conducted and 4 main themes emerged: Professional Identity, transformative learning, research and training for research, and feelings. In conclusion, all the participants expressed ideas that their move to a British institute was a very good choice for both their training and their professional development.

Keywords: Counselling Psychology in Greece, Counselling Psychology in the United Kingdom, Counselling Psychology training

Introduction

Counselling psychology training is a contemporary issue in the field of counselling psychology. Since the establishment of the Division of Counselling Psychology within the British Psychological Society in 1994, a lot of changes in the

process of counselling psychology training occurred. Originally in order to become a (full) member of the division and gain the chartered status, an individual had to have been granted a Statement of Equivalence to the diploma in Counselling Psychology, which was a newly established independent route to accreditation. It was designed for members of other divisions or partly qualified counselling psychologists who wanted to become accredited, and at the same time, it offered a pathway of training for graduates of psychology courses with the Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR) to be trained as chartered counselling psychologists (Farrell, 1996).

Since 1994, a lot of changes have taken place regarding the training of counselling psychologists in the United Kingdom. Nowadays, training programs aim to produce practitioners that are technically competent in a variety of methodological grounds, have integrated personal development and have drawn on scientific roots of psychology developed in their undergraduate degree. This notion of a scientist-practitioner is supported by the close interaction of the work with clinical psychologists that enriched the counselling psychology training with ideas about evidence based approaches and outcome research (Kennedy & Llewelyn, 2001).

European citizen studying became a contemporary emerging notion in Europe after the establishment of the Treaty of Maastricht on the 1st November 1993, when 27 member states, mainly located in Europe, committed to regional integration, thus forming the European Union that got its most recent form after the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. This form of European Union enabled individuals to move to a different country (state) and live, work and engage practice professionally and politically (with limitations) with the same rights as the native population. There is not enough data on the profession of Counselling Psychology describing figures of such movement, but for sure as many professionals have followed a move to a different country, the same happened to Counselling Psychologists (Filippopoulos, in press b). At the same time more and more graduates of psychology referred to different countries in Europe than the one they completed their first degree for further professional and academic development. Such a move, again, has not been demographically studied and there are no statistical figures available describing this move but, from my experience as a lecturer in a Doctorate of Counselling Psychology, the proportion of European students who completed their first degree in their home country and moved to the United Kingdom to further their training in counselling psychology is rather high. I was born and raised in Greece but I completed all my undergraduate and postgraduate training in Psychology and Counselling Psychology in the U.K. In my years as a lecturer I have come across a number of students who completed their first degree in psychology in Greece and continued their postgraduate study in counselling psychology in the United Kingdom. This population is the target population for the present research. Before the illustration of the methodology of the present study a brief overview of the training in psychology and counselling psychology in Greece is essential.

The organisation of the first degree in psychology (equivalent to the Bachelor of Science or Arts in the U.K.) is similar to the university organisation in this country. The degrees are 4 yr courses but with more or less similar credits across modules that are spread in units that cover four years of full time study (Greek Ministry of Education, 2010). Even though there is an emphasis on core modules like research methods and clinical, counselling, developmental and cognitive psychology, the Greek universities lack in experimental experience transferred to students with exemption of one or two universities that attain strong research profiles. A number of psychology graduates complete their degree with no evidence based experience of psychology and especially counselling psychology practice. Nevertheless, most Greek University graduates when applying for GBR to the British Psychological Society are successful obtaining the GBR as they have acquired the appropriate number of module credits altogether.

Counselling psychology is not a university training program that is predicted by the Greek educational system. Therefore, in the public sector of education there are no doctorates or even masters in the field of Counselling Psychology. According to the Panhellenic Psychological Association (2009), a psychology graduate from a Greek university or equivalent can practice counselling psychology and is protected under legislation to provide counselling practice to the general public. It is very often, though, that graduates of such degrees do not feel ready to practice (something that seems very reasonable as they had no or very limited training during their degree towards that direction) and, with the incapability of the Greek educational system to provide professional and postgraduate training, they refer to private institutions for professional training or universities in other countries. The private institutions mainly offer professional part time study that is spread over 4-5 years and offer specific training in a traditional school of counselling or psychotherapy (psychodynamic, person centred and cognitive behaviour therapy). As it can be seen, it is vital for graduates of Greek universities to develop professionally further to their first degree especially if they want to respect the standards set from the Division of Counselling Psychology (Hellenic Psychological Society, 2006) for good practice of counselling psychology. A number of such students refer to universities in the U.K. and this study tried to explore their views on educational, professional development and organisational matters from their experiences in the two different countries/settings. In order to do that, a qualitative research methods design was established so as to give chance to participants to share their realities and then these were grouped into common themes that emerged from most of the interviewees' sayings. A methodology outline follows.

Method

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences and the narratives of those, a qualitative method was employed so as to preserve the authentic accounts of subjective experience.

Interviews were considered to be the most appropriate method to approach these subjective accounts of the people's feelings, thoughts and experiences of studying their first degree in Greece and doing their professional or postgraduate study in the United Kingdom. A semi-structured plan was used and open-ended questions enabled as much as possible a free-flow of talk from the interviewees and deterred leading questions that may have influenced participants' responses.

When using qualitative methods it is expected that more genuine accounts of experiences from individual perspectives may be revealed. Meanings and definitions can be accorded as well as similarity and difference between the people, to the extent that they experienced education in the two countries. In other words, by the qualitative analysis, there was an effort to capture the individuality of experience and views whilst at the same time understand any shared perceptions between the participants. Phenomenology suggests that the only way that the truth can be studied is through the personal experience. Even if the existence of the truth is argued, then the only thing left to study is the personal accounts of the truth or the personal perception of that 'so called' truth.

Through the qualitative method, a deep exploration of meaning and contextuality of experience was facilitated. A semi-structured interview provides the interviewer the ability to guide the interviewee through the open-ended questions to discuss the relevant topics, establishing a flow in conversation (Flick, 1999). Therefore, semi-structured schedule was used in order to focus on particular areas and open-ended questions were offering field for the participants to account their own interpretations in a relaxed way. It also prevented the interviewer from probing or manipulating responses. At the same time it prevented the questions from dominating the interview or being too directive and, therefore, restrictive.

The qualitative design is used to explore general themes about realities of the participants and this study employed such a methodology as no previous research had taken place in the field studying experiences of this particular group of people. Therefore, the qualitative design attempted to explore issues around the main topic area, as it is a new field of enquiry, hoping to provide a deeper insight of thematic units around the issue that could be used as a stepping stone for further research and by no means attempted to produce research data that could claim reliability and validity of any sort of statistical strength. The present study, since it is clear and explicit about how and why it chose the legitimizing criteria of the enquiry, could thus claim methodological rigour (Tobin & Begley, 2004; Barkham & Mellor-Clark, 2000).

The Phenomenological Method

Phenomenology is the 20th-century philosophical movement dedicated to describing the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines such as the natural sciences. As formulated by Husserl (1931), phenomenology is the study of the structures of consciousness that enable consciousness to refer to objects outside itself. Therefore it deals with contents that become present to awareness. These contents include not only the fields of feelings, imagination and basic perception (visual, acoustical, etc), but also transcendental perceptions of everyday life (like temporality and grief). Therefore, phenomenology focuses inquiry not on descriptions of objects but on experience. Phenomenological psychology argues that the quintessence of knowledge is the reality of meaningful experience. So, phenomenology's psychologists conduct researches attempting to investigate experience, as it appears the only way of gaining real knowledge.

Phenomenology can use a critical incident in order to approach the topic of study

(Silverman, 2004). As it is very difficult to get people to talk for their experiences themselves, it is easier to focus on a 'reflection' of the experience, a critical incident (Langdridge, 2004). An example of successful use of a critical incident is reported by Filippopoulos (2010in press a) . Experience is the product of a continuous interaction of the person and the world and therefore life (Giorgi, 1997) and phenomenology can use experience itself as a starting point in order to approach the study of a topic or issue. This study tried to look at the experiences of students in two different countries, within different settings and different educational systems and the interview focused on these experiences by open-ended questions that their main purpose was to trigger the participants to specific directions but in no means to direct their answers.

Interview Procedure

Students that were known to have completed their first degree in psychology in Greece and were currently undertaking postgraduate or professional training in counselling psychology in the U.K. were approached and asked if they wanted to take part in the study. They were given a letter with a brief overview of the study and asking them to consider if they were suitable or an interview in order to assist the research. The possible participants were all born in Greece got their letters via email. One of the people approached was excluded because of unavailability at any time during the interview dates and another participant replaced her. All the people approached were students of counselling psychology doctorate programs held in major universities in the country (4 different institutions).

Prior to each interview a very general overview of the purpose of the research, the nature of the questions that were going to be asked and the form of the analysis undertaken after the interview was stated. This happened in order to enable the participants to fully understand the nature of the discussion that would follow and the general character of the study. It was also stated that they should feel free to express themselves in whatever language means they felt that were more appropriate to use during the interview. Furthermore, this intended to create a relaxed atmosphere so as to sanction the interviewees to express their own reality, their own truth and perception of the phenomena. In ethical terms, this introduction served as a tool to ensure that the participants had consented to the participation, being fully aware of the nature and purpose of the study, as giving consent forms before the interview date would create a very formal vibe that could have inhibited a genuine discussion. Consent forms were provided during the day of the interview.

Interview Schedule

An initial semi-structured schedule based in open-ended questions was designed in order to assist as a general guideline during each interview. The first schedule was offered to two volunteers in order to assure clear comprehension of questions. An interview from a colleague of mine and me as the participant was also conducted in order to explore my deeper pre-conceptions on the matter and try to avoid imposing them to my participants. The schedule was altered according the volunteers' remarks and my personal interview to avoid any bias. Then it was piloted on a participant and transformed to its last formation after studying the implications and problems spotted by this procedure. Although the complete, final semi-structured questions were addressed roughly in the same order so as to assist in obtaining more consistent data, variations and permutations according to each interview's character and countenance were established.

The schedule was designed to focus in the following areas:

1. Personal experience
 - Would you like to talk about your student experience in Greece/ U.K.?
 - How did it feel?
 - Would you characterise it as a good step in your career?
2. Organisational settings
 - Was/ is your study organised thoroughly by the educational body?
 - How were you affected in your studying?
 - Professional development?
 - Feeling?

3. Comparison of the two

- What would you summarise as to be the main differences?
- How could you find yourself before and after in, or what were your views about counselling psychology?
- Counselling practice?
- Professional development?
- Transformative learning?
- Research?
- Future career?

4. General attitudes (Questions in this section were formulated according the previous parts of the interview. The general aim was to collect as much information as possible about the extent of the experience and the participants' views. Hypothetical questions were used and the following two are an example).

- Let's say you could turn back in time, would you again study in Greece/ UK?
- What would you tell to somebody, in order to advise him or her that is about to start a career in counselling psychology?

Participants

According to Langdridge (2007) the snowball sampling method was used in order for the recruitment of participants for the present study. Six people were interviewed, one as a pilot and the five rest using the modified interview schedule. All six interviews were used for analysis; the initial pilot was regarded. Four of the participants were women and two men. Differences in gender provide a variety of experiences for the research's data but there was no attempt to control the gender variable. As Silverman (2001) suggests, the effort to control these 'variables' through a qualitative research would not be possible by using a small number of participants. For the same reasons even though the participants were each representing an age category between the following categories: up to 25, up to 30, up to 40 years old there was no attempt of age variable control. All the categories were embodied. None of the young participants was below the age of 18.

The Interviewees

- Anna is 24; she is in her 3rd year of a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology
- Juliet is 39; she is in part time employment and in her 2nd year of the Dpsyc program
- Poppy is 28; she is married to a GP and is in her 1st year of Dpsyc
- Maria is 32; she is in her 2nd year of Dpsyc course
- Apostolos is 30; 1st year Dpsyc student
- Stefanos is 26; 1st year Dpsyc student

Ethics

To account for ethical issues, the research conformed to the British Psychological Society's guidelines. References to Silverman (2001) and Langdridge (2004) were also considered.

It is recognised that encouraging people to discuss in detail experiences of their lives is a sensitive subject, therefore the interviewer refrained from approaching any area that the interviewee did not wish to cover, nor did they attempt to reinforce discussion of topics that the interviewer accounted as completely irrelevant or inappropriate for the study.

All the participants were affirmed of anonymity and pseudonyms were used when applying to the participants in order to hide individual's identity. All the participants were ensured of complete confidentiality, although it was made clear that sections of the interview transcriptions may be parts of the final version of this article.

The importance of the informed consent (Moustakas, 1994) was considered and all the participants were fully informed about the research to that extent that they would be able to decide whether to participate. They were also encouraged to ask any questions about the study they might have in order to ensure their right decision for participation. Each participant was advised to withdraw him or herself or any information they disclose at any time during the research.

Each interview ended with an informal debriefing enabling the participants to get information on how their interview was going to be analysed, how data would be collected and further ethics of withdrawal. They were encouraged to ask any questions they had so as to assure that the interviewees were completely happy and clear with the procedure.

Although the participants were fully informed of the topics that they would be asked to discuss about during the interviews, and they were prepared to discuss them, uncomfortable or unpleasant feelings might have been occasioned to the participants so a counselling service would have been suggested in the cases that seemed necessary as the people interviewed were students far away from home and

the risk of a distress due to being far away from family and discussing about student life was possible.

Analysis/ Discussion

Each interview transcript was individually addressed in order to explore the data and identify any dominant themes. This was done in three phases as the three different coding analysis was established (Langdridge, 2004). There appeared issues that were focused by the interviewees both as a response to the questions but also as a product of the discussion between the interviewer and the participant generally. Once each transcript was studied individually, all six interviews were compared in order to identify if they shared themes. In this way four major themes emerged. The four themes are described and when relevant discussed with the theory.

Professional Identity

All the interviewees showed a similar awareness of professional identity. Professional identity is an issue that counselling psychologists have tried to address in the past. Even from simple discourse issues about the title of the Division and, therefore, the job title of the profession (Tholstrup, 2000) and the concept of a reflective practitioner identity as suggested by Schon (1983). Participants claimed that when studying in the professional courses in the U.K. they became more aware of the concept of professional identity.

“I feel that my study here has opened my eyes...as to what I always studied is..”
(Apostolos)

“My identity as a professional is clearer as I feel I know exactly what I am asked to do in order to keep saying that I am a Counselling Psychologist, when I graduate...” (Poppy)

Professional identity is closely related to occupational standards that are currently under review since the Health Professions Council has become responsible for the accreditation of the profession.

Juliet provided a different insight to the concept of professional identity by saying:

“...hmm..well...another thing that I feel is a great benefit...is that ...I know...or let me put it differently...I know that I don’t know...everything about what I should be doing as a counselling psychologist... well.. in Greece... I had no idea...I was left alone...to wander...at least here I have got people to refer to ...and explore....which by the way was not a notion that I was ever taught in Greece.. and when I asked for clarification she carried on “yes...explore...in Greece we were taught this is it...this or that...we were never taught that exploring is a learning process...”.

Juliet expressed the very important issue of critical learning when comparing the ways of teaching counselling/psychology that was evident in the sayings of the rest of the participants and constitutes the next theme.

Transformative Learning

Most of the participants expressed a difference in the techniques used in the two different educational settings they experienced. There was a general notion that they were never taught in a transformative learning way in Greece as their experience was purely academic. Transformative learning is defined by Mezirow (1990) as the process of learning through a critical scope. This critical scope is not only limited towards the theory and techniques that are taught, but a critical self-reflection in order to allow a more concrete integrative understanding of one's experience. A critical reflection is a very useful tool in education, especially in levels that reach to professional qualifications as that of counselling psychology.

"I was used into learning by heart a book in order to remember it and take the exams in the University (Greece)..and then forget everything the day after...but now...I cannot remember any word from what I was taught...but I can remember the meaning.." (Maria)

"Knowing what is right or wrong...is one thing..but I am exposed to something new...the fact that is good to doubt and critically evaluate...." (Stefanos)

Research and Training for research

All the participants expressed that they are much more confident in their research skills after spending some student time in the Doctorate of Counselling Psychology.

"Don't get me wrong...I am no ace at research...but at least I know what I am doing for my thesis..." (Apostolos)

"I feel that I can now read international literature and understand what is happening...before...I was just thinking of research as ...something...happening on another planet...now I know...what it is...am looking forward to my thesis..." (Poppy)

Anna also said that she could understand that research is something that every counselling psychologist should do at least once in their life:

"I think...you cannot call yourself a counselling psychologist if you have not done research...how can you evaluate what you read ...if you haven't got a clue..." (Anna)

Feelings

All of the participants have expressed positive feelings about their study in U.K. They have also expressed certain aspects of feelings that are closely related with their professional role:

1. Confidence:

“I am definitely not afraid to see clients anymore...” (Maria)

2. Fulfilment:

“With my placement ..not only I complete the required hours for my degree...but I feel fulfilled...I can offer what I learn for the good of my clients..and at the same time I monitor my practice in action...” (Stefanos)

3. Happiness

“Of course..I would even say I am happy here...well...they’ve got a saying in this country...find something you love and you will never work a day... or something...” (Apostolos)

Conclusions

The profession of counselling psychology is changing. The Health Professions Council is regulating the title of Counselling Psychologist and now more than ever teaching counselling psychology becomes contemporary issue. Within the European Union, students move from their home countries in order to obtain professional development and complete postgraduate qualifications in counselling psychology and the United Kingdom is one of the top destinations for Greek students who completed their first degree in Greece in Psychology.

The present study tried to explore the experiences of students who completed their first degree in Psychology in Greece and then went on to attempt a study at postgraduate level in the United Kingdom. From the interviews 4 major themes were identified, these expanded from professional identity to positive feelings gained through studying in the U.K. Participants also stressed that the teaching techniques used in the British institutes enabled them to gain an insight about the profession and counselling psychology paradigm in general.

I personally believed that I would witness narratives that had to do with culture differences or even language barriers before the interviews. With my great surprise the language barrier was never there as none of the participants talked about it and at the same time no mention on possible cultural differences took place. In total, participants of this study seemed to be enjoying their choice of postgraduate study in U.K. finding this experience highly beneficial professionally. The cross ethnicity teaching of Counselling Psychology within Europe appears to be an emerging concept. The educational systems across Europe could use this to benefit, informing

each other, reaching to a better defined training of Counselling Psychologists in the future.

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